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Maud Berthomier



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What *if* writing rock history was also writing with “ifs”? Or how Lester Bangs liked playing a trick on his reader’s perception of time

Maud Berthomier

- 1 Lester Bangs was born in 1948. “In addition to attending services on Sundays and Bible studies several nights a week, [he] often joined his mother in the ‘preaching work.’ They knocked on the doors of nonbelievers and marched in the streets wearing placards bearing apocalyptic slogans such as WHAT IS YOUR DESTINY? and DO YOU KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS?” (DeRogatis, 2000, 11) How this childhood memory is connected to Bang’s love of music is something that Jim DeRogatis (his biographer) explains to us: Bangs’ mother was a member of Jehovah’s Witnesses, and music was for Bangs one of “the seeds of his dissension from Jehovah’s Witnesses” (DeRogatis, 2000, 13). As a teenager, rock albums were his staple diet.
- 2 But then, Bangs started writing and realized that maybe music would never be the same. The music he loved and talked about in his texts was only rarely contemporaneous with his writing. The reason Bangs put forward was simple: according to him, when he entered the world of rock magazines in 1969—a small literary sphere, which had existed for three years—, it was in a way too late or too soon. The heyday of rock, which he made start with the arrival of the Beatles in 1963–64 and end after the release of *Sgt. Pepper’s* in 1967,¹ had happened some time ago. Similarly the very short heyday of punk rock, with *The Ramones* album in 1976 or *The Clash* album in 1977 as two of his favorite touchstones,² was a long way off. Still, writing in this intervening period between what he called two golden ages, he became involved in rock criticism in a very optimistic way. His texts in the late Sixties and early Seventies pursued one single goal:

The magic promise eternally made and occasionally fulfilled by rock: that a band can start out bone-primitive, untutored and uncertain, and evolve into a powerful and eloquent ensemble. (2003a, 45)

- 3 The rock critics of his time mostly discussed the possible demise and rebirth of rock and lamented the fact that rock had become insipid and lacking originality, seeing in this context the occasion to be negative, if not pessimistic. Richard Meltzer for instance was one of the first rock critics to see the end of the Sixties as the swan song of the first heyday of rock.³ Bangs, unlike Meltzer, always was craving for new music. Against the rumor that rock was dead or could succumb to repetitive death threads, he stood up for its *continual* renewal and radically contested the usual idea of a cyclical history of rock. He instead believed in what he called the "magic promise" of rock.
- 4 This other idea expresses Bangs' wish to see rock returning *permanently* to the spirit of early "primitive" rock from 1964 to 1967. Bangs never ceased from having faith in the "rock dream" (2003b, 257). His mission was based on the belief that "exhilarating new brands of noise" (2003a, 58) would always exist and be capable of relieving the boredom of everyday life. He continuously went on a crusade for his cause, and according to him, this hope for a "new territory" (2003b, 152) and a "virgin turf" (2003a, 151) was regularly fulfilled in America. The Velvet Underground for instance was in his opinion a positive proof of the endurance of early rock, a true "hope for a bright tomorrow" (2003a, 33). Its existence showed that rock music could be a "celebration" (2003a, 64); that, past, present or coming, it was "a holy moment" (2003a, 106); and that, whereas it was certainly fleeting, it could always rise from its ashes.
- 5 This primitive rock from 1964-1967 was "authentic" for Bangs. As Steve Jones and Kevin Featherly explain in the article "Re-Viewing Rock Writing: Narratives of Popular Music Criticism," different points of view exist in rock criticism regarding the topic of "authenticity." Nat Hentoff for instance believed that "history provides a context without which one [that is to say a young musician] cannot claim to be authentic." (2002, 32) Likewise, Robert Christgau, too, "showed a propensity toward using popular music's history to measure its contemporary authenticity." (2002, 33) But Bangs went alone. "Bangs' main concern was always to keep the music aesthetically authentic. [...] If his ideas of what made music authentic were extreme and unapproachable, he still defended them with passion." (2002, 34)
- 6 Bangs was not really interested in history. He preferred studying how history could be written.⁴ His texts therefore were very reflexive, developing an original thought on their context of writing. For instance, Bangs was aware of being in an awkward position. This "magic promise" of a "rock dream" he was dreaming of as a rock critic and as a rock fan did not in practice always come true but often failed. As the quote above reveals, it was "eternally made and occasionally fulfilled." In other words, Bangs knew that he was a staunch defender of a rock dream at a time when the possibilities of a rock dream themselves had almost entirely vanished or at least become more and more scarce. But this awkward position did not hinder Bangs' crusade. It paradoxically reinforced it in a more positive way. To entertain this dream was indeed more essential during the "rock droughts" (2003a, 114) than during the heydays. Especially in this slack period (1969-1973), an unconditional love and faith in music was needed. Or, more to the point, Bangs may have found convenient to outline such a timeline: these dividing lines between the ebb and flow of rock were useful constructed milestones for developing a persona in his texts through which he could be a cultural gatekeeper making this rock dream his entire duty.
- 7 Bangs felt bound to use all possible means at his disposal in his texts to combat his reader's "faltering faith" (2003b, 154). One of them consisted in distorting rock history

in such a way that it did not belong to cycles anymore (or at least exceeded them). In this respect, the “rock dream,” as just described, had *timeless* and *sacred* connotations: words like “holy,” “magic” and “eternally,” or expressions such as “new territory” and “virgin turf” supported the idea of a Promised Land. The role of a rock critic for Bangs was in fact more than a cultural gatekeeper: it was to be a missionary, someone whose mission was to proselytize. In short, rock was Bangs’ religion, if not literally, at least metaphorically in his texts. On the other hand, rock also was for him a pretext for revising history. This other technique, also central to his writings, continued to distort, lengthen, and shorten time, but with the additional effect of entangling fact and fiction. Bangs, too eager to wait anxiously for the next cycle of rock, frequently denied his reader access to the ordinary course of events. His texts, not taking account of the reality but rather revealing the dreamy elements in the rock dream, deconstructed the narratives of rock history in order to recompose them in a complete imaginative way. In doing so, Bangs did not really write *about* rock history. He *directly* wrote rock history by often rewriting it at his own convenience.

- 8 In particular, Bangs often used a very short word to modify his reader’s perception of time: the conjunction “if”—which will be the focus of this article. A large number of “ifs” in his texts are indicative of a twist of events in which history and fiction can merge. All those “ifs” have specific meanings, but a sample selection of four examples will give some idea of the technique: 1) the “if” that can be read as a “if not” 2) the “if” as being the expression of a fantasy 3) the “if” linked to the idea of a miracle 4) and the “if” close to a “once upon a time”.⁵ This list of four “ifs” shows how history could be caught in the meshes of fiction in an ascending order. Each one also highlights how playful and cheerful Bangs’ idea of time was. Bangs wanted to entertain his reader with the hypothetic, the impossible, and the unreal. Reality was for him boring, saddening, and tiring, while its rewriting was interesting and satisfactory. Moreover, relying on these “ifs”, sharing with a lot of joy and humor his enthusiasm, Bangs could convince his reader and eventually convert him to his way of thinking. Rock—even if it were in dream—appeared, to the reader, closer. Reciprocally, the reader, because he was entertained and happier, could more easily adhere to the cause of rock. More importantly, he took part in the rewriting of history. Feeling involved, as it is analyzed below, he could play an important role alongside Bangs’ *persona* in his texts. The conclusions of the article will show indeed that Bangs’ *persona* and the reader’s perception of time cannot be analyzed separately.

What is probable and regrettable?

If punk America is dying behind the curdled MSG-free dregs of Hip and all the corny Experiments in New Designs for Living people are trying to get their rocks off and find themselves in, *if* kids are really too smart and cool to just loon about anymore, *if* first day of summer means rolling one after another from new lid and plopping hour on hour in front of television or record player instead of tearing into the street and hunting out buddies and leaping and yupping till at least some of the scholastic poison accumulating like belladonna ever since September is plain crazied out of your soul, *if* all of that’s a pipe dream and I’m just an old fart now—*if* all that’s true, then THE LESSON OF “WILD THING” WAS LOST ON ALL YOU STUPID FUCKERS sometime between the rise of Cream and the fall of the Stooges. (2003a, 64) [We put the « ifs » in bold and italics]

- 9 In this passage, Bangs records undesirable events. The more he thought about them, the sadder he became. Do we really have to think that all that comes after those “ifs” is “true”?, seems to be asking Bangs. In all probability, as the present tense repeatedly used in the sentence suggests, it is very likely that such events will occur. Nevertheless, Bangs instills a doubt in the reader’s mind about that *first conditional* through the repetition of “if.” What if, indeed, that “if” was not so close to a zero conditional, to a basic factual implication—at least not entirely? Its recurrence is not insignificant. It compels us to read this iterated “if,” not as a real “if,” but as an implicit “if not.” In other words, Bangs, unable to convince himself of the reality of the facts, convinces himself of their irrationality. With this implicit “if not,” he distracts his reader’s attention from the observable and verifiable mundane facts, towards an imagined sphere. Recalling the “spirit of celebration” of early rock from the mid-Sixties, he creates a diversion and develops an antidote to boredom and sadness.
- 10 Moreover, with this implicit “if not,” Bangs not only plays with the different meanings of the conjunction “if,” but he also defends a conception of history with which fiction clearly can interfere. This conception leaves the way open for the conditional and hypothetical, and prompts the reader to forget for a while the rational and intelligent accounts of history. It aims definitely at both amusing the reader and making him more easily subscribe to this *other* rock history. In sum, it is the “moralism in the very best sense” that Greil Marcus observes in Bangs’ texts: “the attempt to understand what is important, and to communicate that understanding to others in a form that somehow obligates the reader as much as it entertains” (2003a, xiii). During “rock droughts,” when waiting for authentic rock is long, Bangs in this way ensures that the waiting is pleasant.

What is desirable and impossible?

- 11 If *what is probable* usually saddens Bangs, and *what is extraordinary* largely comforts him, a different conjunction of history with fiction can sometimes emerge from his texts, as follows:
- What blessed it would be *if* all rock stars had to contend with what A.C. [Alice Cooper] elicits, *if* it became a common practice and method of passing judgment for audiences to regularly fling pies in the faces of performers whom they thought were coming on with a load of bullshit. (2003a, 36)
- 12 As is shown in this example, the *second conditional* uses the past tense instead of the present, and describes a hypothetical situation rather than a factual implication. Bangs relies on two “ifs” in this quote to blur the distinctions between the real and the unreal, the factual discourse and the fictional discourse. To freely express an opinion about musicians by throwing cream pies in their faces is indeed not common, but it did happen once on a live TV broadcast concert of Alice Cooper.⁶ Bangs therefore expresses the wish to see more artists experiencing that same reaction from their audience. Building such hope on fiction and fantasy, he invents a story called “creem guerilla” (2003a, 36). This fiction starts from the two conditional sentences seen above and continues in the following pages of the text. It narrates for instance how Iggy Pop would be hit, and how Jim Morrison or John Lennon would be spared. “With Alice Cooper [like with Iggy Pop] you have the prerogative to express your reaction to this show in a creative way” (2003a, 36), explains Bangs. As a result, the reason why

Morrison and Lennon (unlike Alice Cooper and Iggy Pop) are immune to cream pies is because they had become unreachable “superstars” (2003a, 33). In other words, in order to be hit in Bangs’ fiction, a musician has to be a real artist, namely an artist connected to his fans, ready to be provoked by them.

- 13 More striking is the effect that this story of a “creem guerilla” has on the reader’s perception of time. Reading such fiction introduced by the two “ifs” is different from reading a purely historical record. It blends two frames of reference. On the one hand, there is the real and true world, which exceeds the boundaries of the fiction, but from which the fiction borrows its elements (the names of characters for instance, Jim Morrison, John Lennon, Alice Cooper and Iggy Pop; or the action, i.e., the TV broadcast concert of Alice Cooper). On the other hand, there is the world of pure fiction, the “creem guerilla,” which is entirely fabricated by Bangs. Consequently, Bangs’ texts never divorce from the realities of the real world. They always denote something. Their content is referential. And this confers on the general project of his writing some pretensions to historical truth, to journalistic accuracy, and a claim to realism.
- 14 However, if Bangs does not create the content of his stories because he draws his inspiration from the real world outside of his texts, he does create another world inside his texts. In the end, the presence of two simultaneous frames of reference reorients his reader’s attention to a double manner of reading history, both transitive and intransitive: references can be external, or they can cease to be external during the time of a short fiction. Also, the other effect of a story like the “creem guerilla” is to increase the reader’s immersion. The duplication of references tends to erase the gap between fiction and non-fiction. The reader easily navigates from fiction to non-fiction, in favor of the fictional world, which is lived by him as “real” during the time of the fiction and therefore is not perceived as less important than the true real world. In sum, this dream of a “creem guerilla” is cathartic. While he is reading it, the reader really believes in the “eternal promise of rock” and fully experiences it.

What is inconceivable but did happen?

- 15 Then, in several other places in his texts, Bangs hopes for better days in rock history and offers through his persona a self-portrait in which he is, as a rock critic, actually succeeding in predicting the future. Indeed, Bangs persona’s wishes in his texts sometimes are granted, even if they seem at first inconceivable:

So the only hope for a free rock’n’roll renaissance which would be true to the original form, rescue us from all this ill-conceived dilettantish pap so far removed from the soil of jive, and leave some hope for truly adventurous small-guitar-group experiments in the future, would be *if* all those ignorant teenage dudes out there learning guitar in hick towns and forming bands to play “96 Tears” and “Wooly Bully” at sock hops, evolving exposed to all electric trips but relatively fresh and free too (at least they hadn’t grown up feeling snobbish about being among the intellectual elite who could appreciate some arcane folksong), *if* only they could somehow, some of them somewhere, escape the folk/Sgt. Pepper virus, pick up on nothing but roots and noise and the possibilities inherent in approaching the guitar fresh in the age of multiple amp distorting switches, maybe even get exposed to a little of the free jazz which itself seemed rapidly to be fading into its own kind of anachronism, then, just maybe, given all those *ifs*, we might have some hope. Well, maybe the gods were with us this time around, because sure enough it happened. On a small scale of course. (2003a, 43)

- 16 This excerpt both resembles and differs from the two preceding ones. Like the first example, it is a paradoxical sum of “ifs”: there are so many “ifs” that a “but” (or at least a double meaning) is expected. Like the second excerpt, it appears in the optative mood: a grammatical mood that indicates a wish or a hope. Unlike the two former excerpts, it introduces however an idea of miracle, namely that history could be full of “ifs.” These “ifs” for Bangs have an impact on the course of history. They have the power to *make* history through utopia. That is why utopia appears to be the best form of history for Bangs. It is based on hopes and dreams. It sets history on a hopeful course. At best, it can predict what will happen next. For this reason, Bangs’ persona hardly ever fails to bet on the future. Often, his prophecy turns out to be right, if not proving that Bangs truly was a visionary critic, at least making the reader believe (through his persona inside his texts) that he was a visionary critic. What more can a reader wish for, indeed, if a critic’s prophecies turn out to be right?
- 17 For instance, Bangs’ “hope for a free rock’n’roll renaissance” in the most remote areas of America—as quoted above in the fragment of the article titled “Of Pop and Pies and Fun”—is a prophecy confirmed in the rest of the text by Bangs’ discovery of two unknown treasures in Michigan: the MC5 and the Stooges. Detroit was for Bangs the nourishing earth of the rock dream, a haven for the most original bands, and also a call for seeing more new bands descending from the same strain. It symbolized this “new territory,” this “virgin turf,” this Promised Land that he was so keen to see happening. But this narrative and the fact that—as is said at the end of the fragment—“gods were with us this time around, because sure enough it happened” is a truth that only works *inside* the text. A sharp-eyed reader can easily notice a discrepancy between the release date of the article (1970) and the ones of the few albums quoted (1969-1970): respectively, *Kick Out the Jams* (1969) for the MC5, *The Stooges* (1969) and *Fun House* (1970) for the Stooges. As a matter of fact, the “rock’n’roll renaissance” embodied in these supposedly unknown treasures from Michigan, the MC5 and the Stooges, was a phenomenon that in fact had started to occur already one year before the article was written.
- 18 In other words, in the article “Of Pop and Pies and Fun,” the prophecy is based on a fictional flashback. Bangs retrospectively uses a whole series of “ifs,” so that his persona can be portrayed (in the past) as a visionary critic. Still, Bangs’ persona does not always win a bet, but gets occasionally disappointed. After praising the Troggs to the skies for example, he rapidly criticizes them in his texts:
- The enormous promise inherent in the Troglodyte syndrome faded all too quickly, as the prime movers of the Trog scene retreated from the pitiless flare of publicity back [...]. To the best of my knowledge, none of them even had the horse sense to apply and capitalize on all that priceless experience as junior jackals by forming caveman rock groups to dress in loincloths and ashes and play guitars made out of bones and bring the Troglodyte Trip to the world. *If* they had, who knows, we might all be going around right now with de rigueur bones in our noses even in Mellow California [...]. On the other hand, none of that happened, so we can stop our wishful thinking and forget about it (although I still woulda liked to’ve seen Nancy Sinatra with a bone in her nose). (2003a, 54)
- 19 This “promise inherent in the Troglodyte syndrome” failed, but just for the sake of fantasy Bangs formulates it. Bangs in this extract is less interested in what did happen than again in what *could* have happened. Using an “if” and the *third conditional* that refers to a hypothetical situation in the past, he this time deliberately disconnects his

text from reality and insists on fantasy. “I still woulda liked to’ve seen Nancy Sinatra with a bone in her nose,” can we read in the brackets. This technique is important insofar as it is generally applied to Bangs’ vision of the future. Waiting for the next album of the Rolling Stones for instance, Bangs is looking forward to it, convinced that fans can expect a lot from it, although the Rolling Stones themselves have in truth already “abdicated their responsibilities” (2003b, 152) for a long time.⁷ *In fine*, Bangs in most of his texts is not only a talent scout discovering unknown bands like the MC5 or the Stooges in Michigan, but also, if not more so, a fortuneteller overflowing with imagination and optimism. Obviously, the fewer the bands he discovers, the more the dreams he relies on to spread faith and make converts. That is again the choice he makes through his persona in his texts to keep alive the “magic promise eternally made and occasionally fulfilled by rock.” (2003a, 45)

What are the myths that must be countered?

- 20 Finally, sometimes in Bangs’ texts, the “if” is preceded by the conjunction “as.” In this last instance, the locution “as if” conveys an idea of dissimulation, illusion, and hypocrisy. It is very close to the collocation “once upon a time” traditionally employed in the incipit of fables and fairy tales. By far one of the most transparent indicators of an entry into fiction, on this occasion the purpose is not to express the rock dream (like the “ifs”), but to condemn what tended to kill rock repeatedly. Bangs, once again, is against the idea of a cyclical history of rock, but gives his judgment on what could possibly threaten rock. According to him, the music had radically changed in the late Sixties and early Seventies, mainly because it had been used to serve an ideology: the hippies’ political and cultural revolution. For Bangs, these ideas do not belong to the music; they instead had been artificially added to it. They are myths that need to be deconstructed:

By the end of the decade it had become obvious that perhaps the one common constant of our variegated and strung-out peer groups was a pervasive sense of self-consciousness that sent us in grouchy packs to ugly festivals just to be together and dig ourselves and each other, *as if* all of this meant something greater than that we were kids who liked rock’n’roll and came out to have good time, *as if* our very styles and trappings and drugs and jargon could be in themselves political statements for any longer than about fifteen stoned seconds, even a threat to the Mother Country! (2003a, 66)

- 21 This “pervasive sense” of a community, of a meaning of style, of a drug culture, linked to the arts and politics is a series of discourses that Bangs wants to separate from the music. He is adamant that they should not mix. For this reason, clever at presenting them as negative, fake, and meaningless, at turning them into ridicule, he always invites his readers to keep their distance from them. The reader cannot indeed ignore the difference between an “if” and a “as if” in Bang’s texts. While the first one means reading stories as the reality (in the positive sense of a rock dream), the second one leads to read stories *as if* it were reality (in the negative sense of a warning). On a much higher hypothetical level, the “as if” alerts to a danger: the myths from the Sixties that Bangs sees as dangerous lies.
- 22 This difference however should not mask how similar the “ifs” and the “as ifs” can be in regards to the reader’s involvement. The readers in Bangs’ texts are cowriters. The success of a fiction always depends on them, whether this fiction is good (the rock

dream) or bad (the Sixties myths). A fiction is a fiction only if the readers read it as such. It is a fiction only if it becomes a “shared feint assertion” (Searle, 1982, 115),⁸ “the result of a mutual conspiracy” (MacDonald, 1992, 210). Bangs follows this logic to the extreme. It implies that the danger is not so much that the fiction will be *mistaken for* a “true story” (Ricoeur, 1984, 12), but that it will *be taken not* as a fiction. As a result, Bangs always encourages his readers to stretch their imagination, so that the fiction can take shape.

- 23 This call for an imaginative cooperation can summarize Bangs’ perception of history and time. Fiction in his texts aims at *complementing* rather than replacing history. Its goal is to balance rock history and the need for dreams. Its corollary is to offer a new manner of writing. *What if*, indeed, writing about rock history was writing with “ifs”? That would surely be, in the light of Bangs’ texts, a long road full of surprises and promises. That also would perfectly characterize the spirit of the era. As shown by Peter Braunstein in his article *Forever Young: Insurgent Youth and the Sixties Culture of Rejuvenation*, in the Sixties, youth was not an age category, but “the driving force behind American pop culture” (249). It was the expression of a lifestyle, of a state of mind, which was the idea of “presentism” (255).
- 24 More than any other rock critic, Bangs captured this philosophy of time: presentism. His recurrent use of “ifs” in his texts express a perpetual wish to see rock happening and rejuvenated. When it does not exist, rock is imagined. When already past, it is re-experienced. When ahead, it is dreamed of. Bangs always makes rock feel alive and makes it exceed the frontiers of time. Rock is frenetic, unbidden, dissident, radical, to be lived in the moment. It eschews the “rock droughts.” And its endless reenactment becomes a trope and an ethos: it is expressed through Bangs’ persona as an attitude towards life and through Bang’s writing as a new aesthetic. Last but not the least, it creates a unique relationship with the reader: one that, instead of being patronizing, helps the reader to think critically and to develop a witty sense of humor.

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NOTES

1. A key example of Bang's opinion about the Beatles' albums is the article entitled "Dandelions in Still Air" (Bangs, 2003b, 39-46).
2. The article entitled "The Clash" is a good illustration of Bangs' ideas about American and English punk (Bangs, 2003a, 224-59).
3. At the end of the Sixties, Richard Meltzer stopped writing on the topic of rock music to become interested in other forms of American popular culture: football, cigarettes, drinking, black music, etc. Noticeably, in 1972, he wrote a book entitled *Gulcher: Post-rock Cultural Pluralism in America (1649-1993)*. This turn from rock to pop cultures is what Meltzer means by "post-rock" and "pluralism."
4. "Historiography," more than "history," might better qualify Bangs' conception of time.
5. This selection of four examples comes from two articles: "Of Pop and Pies and Fun: A Program for Mass Liberation in the Form of a Stooges Review," *Creem*, November and December 1970 (2003a, 31-52) and "Who's the Fool? et James Taylor Marked for Death," *Who Put the Bomp*, Winter-Spring 1971 (2003a, 53-81).
6. In this article, Bangs refers to a TV concert of Alice Cooper broadcast on American television in 1970. It was part of a series of five other concerts (by The Stooges and Grank Funk Railroad notably) at the Cincinnati Pop Music Festival.
7. This example is taken from another article called "1973 Nervous Breakdown," *Creem*, December 1973 (2003b, 143-53).
8. We translate Searle's expression from French to English. The reference (*Le statut logique du discours de la fiction*) is indeed in French in our bibliography.

ABSTRACTS

It is usually accepted that rock history is divided into cycles. However, from the beginning of his work, American rock critic Lester Bangs took a radically different look at the manner in which that history should be written. In his opinion, rock history did not necessarily have to be seen as an alternation between long periods of expectation and short heydays. It instead could be

imagined as an eternal “rock dream” that would fulfill the wildest promises. To keep such a faith would however imply leaving the door open to temporary escapes in the hypothetical and the conditional. Bangs succeeded in doing so through the recurrent use of the conjunction “if” in his texts. This short term could effectively convince the reader with the most incredible histories. In other words—as a *tour de force*—not only did it allow a wide variety of time-distortions, but it also reoriented the reader’s attention from history to fiction. What if indeed, writing rock history was also writing with “ifs”? Bangs never ceased to raise this question with a lot of humor in his texts. And in the end, no matter how unbelievable that history of rock may have been sometimes, Bangs always was a cultural gatekeeper, a keeper of the flame. Even if he played a trick on his reader, he still made him believe in rock, and in that way as a critic carried out his mission, never failing to do his duty.

Il est aujourd’hui habituellement admis que l’histoire du rock s’écrit par cycles. Pourtant, le critique rock américain Lester Bangs dès le début de sa carrière posa un regard radicalement différent sur la manière dont cette histoire devait s’écrire. Selon lui en effet, l’histoire du rock ne devait pas nécessairement être vue comme une alternance entre de longues périodes d’attente et de brefs âges d’or. Elle pouvait au contraire s’imaginer comme un « rêve rock » qui répondrait de façon permanente aux promesses les plus folles. Entretenir une foi aussi grande néanmoins impliquait de laisser la porte ouverte à des échappées temporaires vers l’hypothétique et le conditionnel. Bangs y parvint grâce à l’emploi répété dans ses textes de la conjonction « si ». Ce terme très bref pouvait de manière efficace convaincre le lecteur, même à l’appui d’histoires les plus invraisemblables. En d’autres termes, tel un tour de force, non seulement autorisa-t-il de nombreuses distorsions temporelles, mais il détourna aussi l’attention du lecteur de l’histoire vers la fiction. Et si de fait, écrire l’histoire du rock était aussi écrire avec des « si » ? Bangs ne cessera jamais de soulever cette question avec beaucoup d’humour dans ses textes. Et au bout du compte, peu importe que cette histoire du rock ait été parfois invraisemblable, Bangs fut toujours un arbitre du goût musical, un défenseur invétéré du rock. Même s’il joua des tours à son lecteur, il lui fit croire encore au rock, et de cette façon ne manqua jamais d’accomplir sa mission et de remplir pleinement ses fonctions de critique.

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Keywords: Lester Bangs, rock criticism, music, history, fiction, myth, writing, time

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AUTHOR

MAUD BERTHOMIER

Paris 3 - Sorbonne Nouvelle